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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 006020

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: WATER OFFICIALS DISCUSS COOPERATION FOLLOWING
DISENGAGEMENT

REF: TEL AVIV 02533

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz, reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: At Trilateral Water Talks in Tel Aviv September 22 Israeli and Palestinian water officials agreed to discuss possible new water supplies for Gaza, including the purchase of water from the Israeli grid for the former settlement areas and the possibility of larger quantities from the Ashkelon desalination plant or the Israeli grid. The sides will also cooperate to rectify damage to wells following the recent turnover. Planning is moving ahead for a donor coordination meeting on water needs, with an emphasis on addressing sewage treatment in Gaza. End summary.

Water Officials Looking Ahead After Disengagement

2. (C) On September 22, the U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian Trilateral Water Working Group (TWWG), chaired by NEA Senior S&T Advisor Charles Lawson, gathered at USAID offices in Tel Aviv for the first meeting of the group following Israel's disengagement from Gaza and part of the West Bank. In opening remarks, Ambassador Jones noted that although he had only just started in his new position, he welcomed the opportunity to address the TWWG to emphasize the importance the United States places on the TWWG's cooperative activities that so positively affect people's lives. The Ambassador encouraged the group to set a date for a donor coordination meeting to address water and sewage treatment needs, to finalize arrangements for the Gaza Emergency Connector, and to consider the possibility of continuing supplies from the Israeli grid to the former settlement areas in Gaza. In his opening remarks, Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) Chairman Fadel Ka'wash highlighted the serious sewage problem in Gaza and said that disengagement provided an opportunity to improve the situation. Israeli Water Commissioner Shimon Tal emphasized the need to continue practical cooperation on water issues. Ambassador William Taylor, U.S. Representative to the Quartet Special Envoy, urged the group to develop an overall plan for water supplies; he noted that donors were looking to improve the quality of life and economic prospects of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

3. (C) Ka'wash reported that the Israeli water company Mekorot had cut water supplies at the Rafah crossing following disengagement. Tal committed to addressing that issue and any other post-disengagement water issues promptly, including in the Joint Water Committee (JWC) and the Joint Technical Committee (JTC). Both sides agreed to exchange technical information to allow the PWA to repair damage to wells and pipes that had occurred following disengagement.

Additional Water Supplies from Israel to Gaza

4. (C) During the meeting, the PWA and USAID signed an MOU for construction of the Gaza Emergency Connector, which will carry 5 million cubic meters/year of water from Israel into Gaza. (Note: In the 1995 Interim Agreement, Israel agreed to sell the Palestinians 5 MCM/year of water for use in Gaza. For a variety of technical, bureaucratic, and political reasons, the project is only now being implemented. End note). Lawson encouraged the Israeli and Palestinian sides to finalize their arrangements in the JWC to ensure that water from this project would start flowing as soon as possible.

5. (C) The sides agreed to hold discussions within the JWC on possible additional water supplies to Gaza. The planned discussions will include the possible purchase of supplies from the Israeli grid to the former settlement areas in Gaza to supplement supplies from the wells recently turned over to the PWA. Ka'wash reported that the PA Cabinet had agreed in principle to consider purchasing up to an additional 15 MCM annually (over and above the 5 MCM for the Emergency Connector) from the recently-opened Israeli desalination plant at Ashkelon or from the Israeli national water system. That possibility will also be addressed in the JWC.

Many West Bank Villages Still Lack Water

6. (C) Ka'wash noted that some JWC-approved projects were seriously behind schedule, and many more have been waiting for approval for many months (or longer). He emphasized that the PWA had proposed these projects to meet urgent needs of Palestinians in the northern West Bank. As an example,

Ka'wash noted that up to 200 villages in the West Bank are not connected to water supplies. Tal said the Israeli team had been urging the JWC to begin serious discussion of the long-term water needs of the West Bank. He argued that if the JWC continues to focus only on immediate issues, that will never lead to a comprehensive solution to the water problems. While committing to moving forward on projects already before the JWC, Tal admitted that work on those projects would be easier if there were a vision of long-term supply solutions, such as a dedicated desalination plant on the Israeli coast to supply water to the northern West Bank. Lawson urged both sides to discuss long-term options even as they worked to resolve immediate supply issues. In addition to these issues, the JWC will address planning for the Bethlehem-Abu Dis wastewater treatment plant. USAID already has committed in principle to be a partner in this project.

Donor Coordination Conference

17. (C) Both sides agreed to work towards a donor coordination conference to address wastewater and sewage treatment and the need for additional supplies of potable water. The TWWG agreed to tentatively schedule the conference for mid-November. A planning meeting for the donor coordination conference, with Embassy, Consulate General, USAID, Water Commission, Civil Administration and PWA participation, is scheduled for October 12. Lawson noted that USAID also was ready to provide assistance to the PWA on creating consumer awareness, including the need for appropriate pricing and timely payment to ensure treatment of sewage and the availability of clean water supplies.

Comment

18. (C) According to Ka'wash, when the PA Cabinet first considered the 5 MCM Gaza Emergency Connector, it rejected the project, questioning why the Palestinians should buy water from Israel. There was also concern whether purchasing the 5 MCM might affect future final status negotiations on water. At the next cabinet meeting, which Ka'wash attended, he so convincingly argued that the water situation in Gaza is dire that the cabinet approved not only the 5 MCM project but also the purchase in principle of an additional 15 MCM from Israel. While the 5 MCM project should move forward very soon, the additional 15 MCM will take more time to implement, as the Israelis and Palestinians will have to work through all the details in the JWC. Concerning the sewage situation in Gaza, which Ka'wash pointed out is also very serious, the donor conference will be an essential step in addressing that problem.

19. (C) Ka'wash's complaint that too many projects before the JWC have been stalled for too long is not a new one. Most of the projects to which he was referring are projects in the northern West Bank. This area is one of the greatest sensitivity to the Israelis, because most of the water that Israel uses from the West Bank comes from this area. Thus, Israel very carefully scrutinizes projects to determine if they might adversely affect any Israeli water sources. Over time, the GOI and PA, together with the donor community, will need to look at creative solutions to address in a more comprehensive way the long-term water needs of the West Bank and Gaza. Most experts agree that water desalination will have to be an integral part of any long-term comprehensive solution. End comment.

10. (U) NEA/RA Lawson and Consulate General Jerusalem cleared this message.

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